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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon arguments from the sociology of work and from debates about literacy, this paper explores the connection between schooling, work, and language through an ethnographic analysis of school and community in a rural, northeastern United States setting. The paper presents evidence of a disjunction between schooling and adult work and between schooling and experiences with literature, challenging the school's self-understood mission. The paper concludes that educators should stop assuming that schooling leads to adult work and should recognize and cultivate student self-direction. (Fifty-nine references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Literature Teaching & Learning
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Abstract

The connection between schooling, work, and language has grown increasingly problematic in recent decades. This paper explores that connection, drawing upon arguments from the sociology of work and from recent debates about literacy to present an ethnographic analysis of school and community in a rural, Northeastern setting. The analysis shows a disjunction between schooling and adult work and between schooling and experiences with literature, challenging the school's self-understood mission.

Schooling, Literature, and Work in a Rural Mountain Community

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Introduction

The paper which follows is a discussion of school and community relations based on an ethnographic study of schooling, literature, and work in a small, rural mountain community in upstate New York. The study grew out of several years of working and teaching in a town we call Somerville, where more than half the school children are living in poverty. It was the result of a growing concern that conventional wisdom and public policy regarding education of "at risk" or disadvantaged children fail to take into account powerful sociocultural and economic influences which dominate the development of attitudes and constrain efforts at school achievement. Our research focuses upon the relationships between adult work and schooling, and on out-of-school experiences with literature as well as literature in school.

A starting assumption is that one reason at-risk students are "at risk" with regard to schooling is that there is a mismatch between the language, culture, knowledge, and social relations of the home and those of the school. We further assume that gaining insight into the nature of that mismatch and its role in school achievement requires detailed investigation of homes, communities, and schools. Our investigation of this mismatch has led us to question widely-held assumptions about the roles of schooling, literature, and work in people's lives.

The analytic foci we bring to such investigation concern work and literature. We focus upon adult work because there is presumed to be a central relation between educational achievement and adult work, and as much research has shown, where adult work is <u>not</u> what the school prepares for, then there are typically educational problems of various sorts. We suggest that the mismatch proposed above is related to and expressed through work--the work of students in school, the work that school supposedly leads to, and the work of adults in the families from which students come. We focus upon literature because it is an aspect of literacy which moves beyond functional workplace literacy, it is relatable to social background in complex ways, and it is assumed in our schooled culture to be connected with valued forms of reasoning and thinking. We suggest that the mismatch proposed above is related to and expressed through experiences with literature--literature as encountered in school, the literature and reasoning that school leads to, and the literature practices of adults in the families from which students come.

We explore schooling and work by critically examining official statements about the relation between schooling and the economy vis-a-vis research on the sociology of work and the organization of schooling. We contextualize these general debates by discussing issues that arise

from our particular ethnographic case, issues that argue against views that school simply reproduces or transforms existing community-economic relations. We analyze the nexus of literature, schooling, and social background by critically examining official statements about literacy, literature, and schooling vis-a-vis research on social life and literature, in schooled and nonschooled settings. We contextualize the general arguments further by relating them to the issues arising from our ethnographic study, for we report on a "literature-based curriculum" which has considerable success, but whose failings point to basic problems with the way in which literature, social tradition, and schooling are usually thought about.

These problems arise from under estimating the sociocultural structuring of those encounters with texts we call "literacy" and "literature". In our conclusion we attempt to reassess that sociocultural context, as it bears upon work and experiences with literature, in and out of school. We are led to re-examine our starting assumption of "mismatch," not because differences between the discursive culture of home and school are nonexistent or inconsequential, but rather because such differences do exist, enduringly exist, and are quite consequential. In our analysis, such differences arise out of social dynamics that are impervious to the usual solutions of educational discourse about "closing gaps" and "providing access." Let us now turn to the argument about schooling, work, and literature.

Schooling and Work

Questioning Connections

The connection between work and schooling is at the heart of the national concern expressed in (a) *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984), (b) the media, and (c) the recent initiative called *America 2000*. Educators, politicians, and a coalition of business leaders are engaged in a highly visible discussion of how best to reform the education system so as to provide a top quality workforce capable of maintaining the country's competitive edge in the changing global economy. Schools are charged with developing workers with appropriate cognitive and vocational skills, behaviors, habits, and values for existing jobs or on-the-job training. There is considerable public support for the view that schools have failed in this mission, that large numbers of students are leaving school with inadequate literacy skills for success in the workplace. Further, there is growing concern that fundamental changes in the world of work will create greatly increased demands for workplace competencies, that a high-tech explosion in the workplace will require ever-increasing literacy skills and problem-solving abilities.

Current rhetoric on the school-work connection is weakened by two major inadequacies. One is that the consideration of workplace requirements is based largely on a "vision" of the future, with little or no regard for the realities faced by American families in the workplace today. The official position of the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills regarding this vision and the goals it fosters is set forth in the recent report for America 2000, *What Work Requires of Schools* (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991):

> A strong back, a willingness to work, and a high school diploma were once all that was needed to make a start in America. They are no longer. A well-developed mind, a passion to learn, and the ability to put knowledge to work are the new keys to the future of our young people, the success of our businesses, and the economic well-being of the nation (p.1).

Opposing this view, a number of scholars argue that the United States will not need huge numbers of highly skilled workers in the future unless substantial changes are made in government policies and corporate practices that have almost nothing to do with schools (Weisman, 1991). One study conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor has concluded that the growth in high-skills jobs will stagnate in this decade, while employment in lower level jobs will continue to grow (Kutscher, 1991). In evaluating how well schools do in preparing young people for work, our "vision" of the American workplace must be informed by a close look at the real work experiences of families and individuals today.

A second, and perhaps even more significant oversight is the tendency to view the relationship between schooling and work simplistically, concentrating on the role of schools in preparing young people for work, while missing the reciprocal nature of the relationship, particularly the importance of work as an antecedent of schooling. Work shapes attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals, families, and communities. Particular orientations associated with families' work experience can have a powerful influence on the schooling of their children. It is this side of the school-work link which must be better understood if we are to achieve effective school reform. Notwithstanding the claim of *America 2000* that the solution to every problem we face as a nation begins with education, the same document points out that children spend 91 percent of their lives from birth through age 18 in places other than school, acknowledging the paramount importance of home and community in promoting learning and shaping children's values (Coleman, 1991, p.iv). Work plays an important role in the creation of the social and cultural capital conveyed by adults to their children.

There is a strong tendency for students from working-class backgrounds to be less successful in school than their advantaged contemporaries (Campbell & Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972; Mehan, 1989). Students from working-class families tend to end up in working-class jobs (Willis, 1977). Implicit in the targeting of poverty areas to receive funds for compensatory education are the assumptions that remedial and special education can improve a child's educational prospects, and that education improves life chances. These assumptions are problematic. There has been very little improvement in the school achievement of "at risk" students despite almost two decades of legislation and funding for compensatory and special education programs (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Chubb, 1988; McGill-Franzen, 1987). This suggests that the schools alone cannot compensate for substantial economic and other disadvantages (Carnoy & Levin, 1985).

Work As A Shaper of Attitudes

We want to suggest looking at work not as the result, or output, of schooling, but rather

as an important background factor, part of the input. Work has a powerful impact on the language, culture, knowledge, and social relations of the home, and can, thereby, be seen to lie at the crux of the mismatch we have cited between the ethos of the home and that of the school. There are two aspects of the influence of work experiences in a community on the school success of its children. The first is a fairly direct effect, noted by Ogbu (1989) and others, whereby aspirations of disadvantaged youth are suppressed by the belief that they cannot advance into the mainstream and secure desirable jobs like middle-class (white) Americans through academic achievement. The work situation of their parents and other community members creates the perception that opportunities for good jobs are not truly available to them and that it is unlikely that any effort made to achieve in school, will be adequately rewarded. Although due to social and geographic marginality, rather than racial minority group membership, the same effect can be seen in our case study, where the work environment of Somerville prevents youngsters from buying into the middle class folk theory which asserts that one gets a good job which pays well through academic achievement and school credentials. The second is perhaps a more subtle, complex effect, but one with extensive impact on the lives and schooling of children, particularly lower-class children. This has to do with the meaning of work socially, individually, historically, and its role in the everyday lives of people. Heath (1983), Lareau (1989), Willis(1977) and others have pointed out that immersion in working-class jobs produces particular understandings of the way things are organized which conflict with a middle-class system of schooling. In our case study community, we find this conflict to be deeply rooted, tied, as it is, to people's values and purposes. Social relations, source of authority, language use, present vs. future orientation, and perception of risks and rewards are just some of the many dimensions of work experience which, in poor communities, can undermine the type of attitude, effort, and participation generally accepted as necessary for successful school achievement.

Clark and Willis (1984) argue that the real-life knowledge and community culture of working-class children create a general sense of the irrelevance of schooling. We see this in our case study as a skepticism about the connection between schooling and getting ahead through economic or social mobility. The dominant influence on the way in which young people make choices or decisions about their futures comes from their class and cultural backgrounds. The effect of these factors on the education of adolescents is critical and must be understood before there will be improvement in educational outcomes for disadvantaged youth. "So long as we try to understand this experience only through the school, its constructions, mystifications, and specifically 'educational models,' we will be lost and confused" (Clark & Willis, 1984, p.12). Willis's (1977) description of a counter-culture illustrates that the suppression of aspirations among working-class youth can take the form of discouragement over perceived lack of opportunity to compete for good jobs. Ogbu (1989) ties the lowered aspirations of poor black students to their collective historical experience of discrimination and their conviction that opportunity is not there for them through conventional channels of achievement as it is for middle-class white youth. While racial discrimination is certainly an important factor in the shared experience of minority groups, it is interesting to note that the phenomenon of low aspirations as a response to one's environment cuts across racial lines and seems to be more significantly a function of class. Rural white communities are just as likely to spawn the notion that opportunities for good jobs are not available to local citizens on the basis of effort and achievement, particularly academic achievement: "You can't go far here." (Fitchen, 1991).

Further, our findings, like Fitchen's work on rural poverty, parallel and confirm Wilson's (1989) observation that in poor inner-city neighborhoods, those who achieve success move away, leaving the community even more impoverished in terms of role models and cultural norms which might encourage high academic and employment aspirations.

MacLeod's (1987) interesting investigation of attitudes and behaviors involving what he calls the achievement ideology provides another case where the lowering of aspirations cuts across racial lines. He compares two groups of adolescent males in an urban housing project and finds that the predominantly black youths have adopted behaviors and attitudes consistent with school achievement as an avenue to social and economic mobility. The hardcore group of disaffected white youths reflects a total rejection of school values and what might be termed responsible work behaviors. Their belief in the hopelessness of their situation, in contrast to the belief of the black group that if they work hard they can succeed, seems to be related to family situations, particularly the length of time they have been on welfare. This finding was echoed by several of our Somerville case study respondents, who attributed their particular success to family encouragement which included the strong belief that if one works hard enough, one can achieve success. This may be a glimpse into a deeper level of cultural influence on attitude development, one explored by Clark (1983) in his Chicago studies of family life. Despite the well-documented tendency of disaffection, lowered aspirations, and school failure to be associated with poverty, there are subtle differences in family interaction and environmental experience which account for important differences in attitudes and beliefs. Anderson (1990) concurs with Clark and other researchers who have found that some disadvantaged youths work hard to overcome adversity and manage to succeed. They are highly motivated, confident, and have a positive outlook, despite the distrust and discrimination they encounter. "They appear to emerge from a family and social background that, while financially poor, places much emphasis on self-discipline, self-esteem, religious values, and a strong belief in the work ethic" (p. 225). The pervasive belief that job opportunities are based on connections, rather than on qualifications and school achievement is only occasionally mediated in disadvantaged homes by examples of success through hard work and academic achievement.

The impact of perceived workplace reality on the motivation of young people is summed up nicely by Anderson (1990) in his assertion that the preponderance of low level jobs open to minority youth commit them to a life of poverty, so that "many youths view the required investment in job training against the uncertain or limited benefit as essentially a losing proposition" (p.224). Although Anderson is talking about a specific urban, ethnic minority group, his point is generalizable to other marginal groups whose experience with the job market convinces them that education (job training or schooling) is not worth the effort.

Adult work shapes the language, knowledge, culture, and social relations of families. Occupation affects personality (Kohn, 1990), values, beliefs, practical judgements, opinions, ethics, and whole ideology. Psychologists have identified certain job conditions which influence ideas and attitudes, indeed shaping individuals' perceptions of reality. Kohn finds the opportunity for occupational self-direction most important, and it provides a good example of work as a shaper of attitudes and beliefs.

> Exercising self-direction in work-doing work that is substantively complex, not being closely supervised, not working at routinized tasks-is conducive to favorable evaluations of self, an open and flexible orientation to others, and effective intellectual functioning (Kohn, 1990, p. 42).

It is not hard to see that most people in low-level jobs have little opportunity for occupational self-direction. Implications of this finding for community and schooling can be seen in Kohn's description of self-directedness of orientation in general as an underlying dimension of orientation to self and society. While self-direction is typically seen as located in middle-class jobs, our findings indicate that there is sometimes a good deal of self-direction involved in providing for families in poor rural areas. It takes the form, however, of a practical independence which probably does little to incline individuals toward the formal demands of schooling.

The notion of self-direction corresponds to the first of four occupational dimensions identified by Carnoy and Levin (1985) in their study of the correspondence between elementary classroom interactions and workplace values in two communities. These dimensions are: a) external vs. internal standard of authority; b) verbal self-presentation; c) present vs. future orientation; and d) emphasis on cognitive skills and achievement. On all four dimensions, the socialization pattern at school reflected that of the occupational level of the parents. In light of the mismatch between community values and the ultimate goals of educational attainment, it is argued that, in working-class communities, this disenfranchises children in the educational arena. The Somerville case study shows, however, that this mismatch is complex and exists on several levels. By acknowledging the social identity and cultural frame of reference of Somerville children, the elementary school maximizes student engagement and produces successful student outcomes. But by the time students reach middle school and begin the transition to high school, their practical orientation is increasingly antagonistic toward scholastic or aesthetic pursuits. There can be no doubt that on a wide range of dimensions (competition, language use, preference for extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation and reward) there is a powerful relationship between the orientations adopted by working-class children and the work experience of their families (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 1989).

Historically, work has occupied a central role in people's perceptions of their particular realities. It was once part of an ethos which valued doing a good job, pride in craftsmanship, and autonomy with reciprocity. Work had intrinsic value (Schleuning, 1990). After the industrial revolution, the ethos of work changed a good deal, but even in the 20th century, the American dream included a value placed on doing a good job and trying to get ahead. The creation of an identity through work has been of traditional importance, but seems to be a casualty of modern day working-class employment as jobs have become objectified, segmented, and routinized. People's work has become a commodity. As work has become increasingly meaningless, workers' needs for satisfaction and integration have shifted to consumption, an extrinsic system of motivation and reward (Schleuning, 1990). As discussed below, where consumption is fueled by sources outside the formal sector of the economy, often the case in Somerville, the value of schooling is further obscured. Members of the working class have begun to define themselves not in terms of their jobs, but on the basis of their community and kin.

> Where they come from and where they live is who they are. For such workers the prospect of moving to a new location [for work] implies a loss of ties that are far more important than the tie to work (Epstein, 1990, p. 96).

This idea of identity formation and work supports Lareau's (1989) findings and fits with our finding that, in a poor community, engagement with the school is based on belonging to the group and participating in non academic group functions, but not on academic achievement.

Anderson (1990) raises another issue which tends to undermine the perception that schooling leads to economic success among job trainees in the inner city and which is not unique to their situation: participation in the underground economy. In urban areas, the visibility of role models making quick, easy money through drug trade and other crimes has caused more traditional role models, if they are still present, to lose prestige and authority. In this economic context, the marketplace shapes attitudes and beliefs with which it is hard for old platitudes of self-sacrifice, hard work, and academic achievement to compete. In much the same way, the prevalence, in communities like Somerville, of role models who get by nicely by combining some-time work, informal arrangements, and transfer payments, maintaining control over their time and efforts in the bargain, perpetuates the view that academic achievement is irrelevant.

The underground economy cited by Anderson (1990) is part of what Louis Ferman (1990) calls the irregular, or informal, economy. Ferman uses the term to describe what our respondents refer to as work done "off the books," or, "under the table." Included in this category are activities ranging from production of goods and services to criminal enterprises. His discussion of the distinctions between the formal and informal sectors of the economy is helpful in understanding the influence participation in the informal sector may have on development of ideas and attitudes about work and schooling in communities such as Somerville, where such participation constitutes a substantial part of the economic activity. While formal sector units are regulated and credentialed, informal units lack this legitimacy and have, therefore, less access to institutional capital and must minimize capital investment or obtain financial support from family and friends. Formal sector units require licensing, and emphasis is on standardization of performance with specific criteria to be fulfilled, but in the informal sector, standardization of performance is not a dominant norm. In the formal sector, internal organization is fixed and hierarchical and workers must certify their acquisition of skills and work experience. Units in the informal economy stress flexible division of labor and nonhierarchical relationships, and worker credentials are not important. Indeed, since work opportunities are unpredictable, emphasis is placed on ability to adapt to unforeseen contingencies. Time, money, and manpower are fixed and predictable in the formal sector, while in the informal sector these factors are indeterminate, flexible, and highly unpredictable. The informal sector is also characterized by a higher degree of risk than the formal sector (Ferman, 1990). The uncertainty of things and the devaluing of credentials create an environment in which pursuit of academic achievement may not seem like a wise way to invest one's time or energy.

Where participation in the informal sector is a major part of the economic activity of a community, the features of that sector will influence the particular ways in which families and individuals position themselves with respect to authority and production. These orientations

create the context within which the schooling of children takes place. While not as dramatic as the effect described by Anderson (1990), the fact that some people find they are better able to provide for their families by combining informal work with social benefits than by following the mainstream path from school achievement to full time work also undermines the type of "work ethic thinking" desired by employers and educators alike.

Somerville: Skepticism About Schooling and Work

The ethnographic data from which the following information is drawn were collected through participant observation in the school and at community events, and interviews conducted in Somerville over a period of more than two years. School officials made classrooms and records accessible and teachers and school staff were interviewed often during the research period. Family visits were made, and parents and former students were interviewed, along with several local employers. These many conversations focused on the perceived relationship between schooling and work and on the relationship between the literacies of the local community and of the school. Our findings provide ethnographic grounding for the above discussion of work and its role in the development of ideas and attitudes about schooling and work. The work environment of this community supports the perception that academic achievement is not necessary and does little to prepare one for the world of work.

The Somerville case study community is made up of neither white collar nor traditional factory blue collar workers, but represents, rather, a third type of work community, a mixture of formal and informal sector workers. Most of the local people work in low paying jobs, many of them seasonal, and many combine jobs with transfer payments, informal arrangements with family and neighbors, and living off the land as a way of providing for families. Fifty-two percent of the children in the local K - 8 school are eligible for free or reduced lunch, which indicates that their family incomes fall below the federal poverty guidelines. (Approximate monthly income for a family of four = $1450) The standard of living is low here, as evidenced by poor housing conditions, old cars in disrepair, and hand-me-downs--the most common clothes in school. Parents and other community members have frequent, positive contact with the school, often centered around holiday festivities, athletic events and other nonacademic functions. The school is seen as an important place for community gatherings, an institution central to people's sense of belonging, but there is little obvious concern with academic achievement among the people of Somerville.

Important employers in the nearby small cities are mills (leather, knitting, golf balls), utilities (power and telephone) and direct care facilities (one hospital, a huge network of facilities and homes for developmentally disabled adults, two prisons, and a drug rehabilitation prison-hospital). There are also some retail and grocery stores, gas stations, and restaurants. The only employment available without making the fifteen mile trip to the city is provided by the town itself, maintaining roads in winter and the municipal golf course in summer, by the local school, and by a small store which has expanded to include a marina business. Several local people are self-employed contractors who work at a variety of jobs from logging to carpentry, often doing odd jobs for the owners of summer camps in the area.

The link between schooling and most of these jobs is unclear. Some have a stated requirement of a high school diploma, although there seems to be no direct connection between school skills and job performance. One adult respondent who had worked in the leather mills, pumped gas, and was a truck driver at the time, offered some insights about job requirements and the importance of schooling. He makes the distinction between the requirement of a high school diploma and its necessity.

R.G.: Oh yeah, you have to have it to get in at the mill. They ask you right on the application.

D.B.: But would you really need to be a high school graduate to do the job?

R.G.: No, nothing like that. They just put it on there. . . .Unless you know somebody, then you'll get in.

Even as he acknowledges the requirement of a diploma, R.G. also reveals the pervasive and probably well-founded belief that getting jobs is more a matter of connections than of credentials. His ambivalence about the value of schooling and about the benefits of economic and social mobility emerges from analysis of a lengthy interview in which R.G. said he wants his small son to get a good education so he can "work with his mind, not with his back." This briefly stated goal contrasts with numerous elaborate references to time spent outdoors, working on motors, cutting trees, riding dirt bikes, and camping out. As he reflects on the fact that he didn't stay in school to pursue a career in architectural drawing, he comes back to his strong preference for being outdoors:

R.G.: I didn't have the, I'd say motivation to keep on going to school. Cause I was more interested in having fun. You know. I don't like being inside. No. I should have. In a way I wish I had. I could be drawing now. But (pause) I would be inside, and I wouldn't be happy. I don't think I'd be happy with it.

This sense of the importance of outdoor activities is common in the small mountain town, as is the apprehension that pursuit of higher education and better jobs requires moving away from the local area. It is not surprising that values and beliefs which are widespread in the community find their way into school. Several teachers tell of students who plan to follow in their parents' footsteps and point out that *they* never graduated from high school. A second grader told his teacher that his father couldn't read and "he does just fine." A third grader told the reading specialist he wouldn't be needing to know about paragraphs, because he was going to get a job in his father's service station. That third grader, now 20 years old, never graduated from high school, but he has a "good job" at a city service station, (his father no longer operates one) and is perceived as successful by himself and other community members.

It should be noted that in this community, as in those studied by Fitchen (1991) and Wilson (1989), students who have used schooling as an avenue of upward mobility have moved away to find further education and professional jobs in other places. Some local people are quick to tell

about them as evidence that their town and school has produced some very successful people in mainstream professions. For the most part though, it is their absence that is noteworthy, since they can no longer serve as role models for those left behind. Young people growing up in the community look to their parents and neighbors for future job possibilities.

The perception that completing high school is not necessary and does little to prepare one for the world of work does not belong exclusively to high school dropouts. It is a perception shared by many employers. When asked about the relative importance of an applicant's high school transcript--grades, attendance record, graduation--those in a position to give jobs with several local business concerns indicated that schooling really didn't matter, at least not from an *achievement* standpoint.

> Owner of Auto Dealership: Well, I'd hate to discriminate between the high school graduate and the nongraduate. A lot of times the nongraduate may be just as good a worker. 'Course if they didn't graduate for these other reasons (referring to earlier mention of dependability, responsibility) then that's another thing.
>
> Hospital Recruiter: No, we don't require it (H.S. diploma). Skills aren't enough. When it comes to performance deficiencies, it's 80% attitude, 20% skills. It's work-ethic-type attributes we expect teachers to impart. We look for values, motivation, drive. . . .

The owner of the dealership rejects the notion of a high school diploma as a worker's credential. In his view, the nongraduate may be just as good a worker. The recruiter concurs and indicates the relative importance of attitude and motivation, which, he says, are far more significant for success on the job than school-learned skills. Other local employers, including the owner of a fast food franchise and the telephone company recruiter agreed that attributes like dependability, positive attitude, and human relations skills were far more important than school credentials. Focusing on curriculum revision for more or higher level skills may miss the mark in the attempt to prepare students for job success. It appears that high school completion is only important to employers as evidence of perseverance, motivation, and responsibility. For community members, school achievement and pursuit of a diploma are part of a system of fulfilling requirements and credentialing, which cannot be assumed to fit with the local way of doing things.

Schooling, Literature, and Social Background

Questioning Connections

Just as the relations between school and work are more complex in Somerville than conventional wisdom would suggest, so also are those between schooling, home culture, literacy, and literature. The last two decades have been a period of educational crisis expressed as a crisis of standards and skills, especially literacy skills. As discussed above, the mounting concern of educators, politicians, and business leaders has become a call for a reforming and restructuring

of the educational system so that students will have the literacy and numeracy skills, the vocational aptitudes and technical inclinations necessary for both existing work and the high technology future towards which the American economy is supposedly heading (Barton & Kirsch, 1990; Report on the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990; Zuckerman, 1989) . This concern with workplace literacy has been accompanied, in recent years, by a discussion about cultural literacy (Hirsh, 1987). As discussed, cultural literacy is about experiences with texts, often literary texts, that define social belonging and presumably encode values (Do you know who Huckleberry Finn is? Do you care?). It goes beyond the information retrieving, storing, and manipulating processes claimed for workplace or functional literacy, and it widens the range of texts and the kinds of literate experience that education "should" consist of. Thus it also widens our perception of a literacy/literature crisis at the heart of our educational crisis.

There are basic problems with elite discussions of functional workplace literacy. The level of educational attainment considered to represent functional literacy keeps rising, as it has throughout the twentieth-century (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). This rise is reasonable, if we assume a unilinear social development in which domains of work-related literacy grow ever more pervasive and complex, but that assumption is questionable. Recently there was widely reported concern over levels of achievement on high school exit SAT test scores, which have basically remained the same from the early 1970s through the early 1990s (e.g. San Fransisco Chronicle, 1991; New York Times, 1990). This plateauing of achievement levels was alarming for educational leaders because the skill needs of the economy in the 21st century are supposedly going to be higher than the during the past decade or so. That projection is only one vision of our economic future, however. As we have argued earlier, the shape of tomorrow's job market is still hotly debated. Government planning documents indicate that the vast movement in the American economy in the 1980s and projected for the 1990s was not toward high-tech, literacy-intensive jobs, but rather towards service sectors jobs (Personik, 1984; Levin & Rumberger, 1983). Some argue that janitors, not computer analysts, are the growing occupational category (Davis, 1985; Newman, 1988). This means that an educational strategy pitched at technically complex literacies and numeracies is a very narrow, elite strategy, which will not answer the needs or inclinations of most students, nor prepare them for likely employment.

The debate about cultural literacy at first seems to offer a plausible alternative. It emphasizes literacy and literature as a way of belonging to social groups, a text-based form of knowledge that ideally incorporates us into a national culture, rather than assigning us a slot in a pyramidal economy. As critics have pointed out, however, this presumption of national culture is problematic, as an empirical description or an institutional ideal (Herron, 1988). The debate about multiculturalism currently occurring at all levels of the American educational system is essentially about whether a core or common American culture exists, or whether it can and should be promulgated as the bottom line of educational endeavor (Ravitch, 1990; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1990).

The debate about cultural literacy and multiculturalism has had the useful effect of inserting a concern with literature into the debate about literacy, schooling, and adulthood. Around the domain of literature the more academic debates about schooling, culture, and society

have intersected with the more grassroots, teacherly concerns such as whole language approaches to education, and a literature-based curriculum (Atwell, 1987; Edelsky, 1984). A literature-based curriculum typically tries to break down barriers between technical or vocational learning and "humanistic" learning by increasing students' encounters with richly diverse texts. This effort faces many difficulties, however, not the least of which is that we have a remarkably homogeneous unofficial literature curriculum in American high schools, which does not begin to reflect the social and cultural diversity of this country (Applebee, 1991). Nor, if reports about "What Seventeen Year Olds [don't] Know" are to be trusted, is this curriculum effective at engaging students' attention or passing on cultural knowledge. Even in Sommerville schools, where a language arts curriculum was modified to make it reflect more closely students' social background, there remain significant problems with the literature and learning equation. There is no simple relation between textual content and social background, and the forms of thinking that we associate with literature and literary modes of reasoning are embedded in social relations that complexly connect, or fail to connect, schools to their communities, and texts to their audiences.

Texts and Social Relations

Before examining the Somerville situation, let us briefly develop this issue of texts and social relations, for it will allow us to better appreciate the dilemmas suggested by the limited success of Somerville school initiatives.

A classic study of text, talk, and social relations is Shirley Brice Heath's Ways With Words: Language, Work, and Schooling in a Piedmont Community (1983). In this careful ethnographic study of "mismatch," Heath describes language socialization, family life, and educational processes for working-class caucasian and African-American communities in South Carolina in the 1970s. She analyzes patterns of language socialization, including literacy practices that sometimes diverge from those of the school and sometimes overlap in early years only to diverge as schooling progresses. She also describes powerful philosophies of language, often tied to religious belief and expression, which prepare students for some schooled literacy expectations and set them in conflict with others. Thus among the white working-class community of Roadville, an evangelical Protestantism teaches a respect for learning names and "telling truth," for explicit, literal language, while it shuns artful, "madeup stories"--the stuff of fables, fiction, and counterfactual hypotheses ("What if you were. . . "). This emphasis on textual literalism serves students well in early school years, for they are keen and prepared to learn their letters and words and the content of "true" texts. But they are averse to and ill-prepared for later demands for more inferential, interpretive, and speculative approaches to language, text, and reality.

Heath describes a different mismatch for the African-American community, and she also recounts the educational innovations in the local schools. These innovations built upon her findings in order to make school curriculum include activities--readings and writings and projects--that were close to the literacy experiences and inclinations of her subjects. These innovations were short-lived, however. Although they dramatically improved student engagement and performance, they did not survive the movement in the 1980s of mandated state-

level curriculum and testing. They did not survive a business-led drive for excellence, which together with cutbacks in funding, curtailed many things, including teacher-initiated reform. Although Heath's study provides a valuable analysis of disjunction between the language experiences and cultural preoccupations of middle-class schools and working-class communities, its somber epiloque also shows the limits of reform that does not get at the basic relations of work and power, language and school. Such relations held in the Carolina Piedmont of Heath's study, and they hold, in a different form, in Somerville.

Somerville: Schooled Literature versus Discursive Culture

The following description of the eighth grade English curriculum, situated within a school-wide integrated language arts curriculum, is based upon long-term classroom observation, participant-observation, and interviews with various members of the teaching staff. The description of nonschool literacy practices--which we analyze as "discursive culture"--is based on observation at community sites and events (such as a beauty parlor and an annual Christmas dinner) and interviews with students, former students, and the parents of students.

As a result of collaborative examination and restructuring of the curriculum five or six years ago, teachers are committed to a literature-based program with a whole language emphasis, and they will articulate the goals and philosophy of the program readily. The various language arts strands are taught within a language-rich environment, using real literature, providing opportunities for self-expression, and generally emphasizing the use of meaningful situations for the development of a strong literacy foundation. All students have access to the full range of services and programs provided by the district.

Children in grades 1, 3, and 6 were observed writing books for publication and enjoying the experience of sitting in the "author's chair" to share their work with other students. Amelia Bedelia (Parish, 1977), Turn Homeward Hannalee (Beatty, 1984), and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (Dahl, 1964) were among the titles read by all students in the elementary grades and used for instruction. Fifth grade students used the Junior Great Books and participated in the choosing of words for spelling and vocabulary study from the weekly reading selection.

Testing requirements seem to have little direct influence on the interaction between reading and writing instruction and literary experiences at the elementary level. At the middle school level, however, there is more evidence of curriculum being shaped by requirements, not only of testing, but of the upcoming transition to the high school. Lesson plans for writing instruction focus on the types of tasks to be tested on the Preliminary Competency Exams: business letters, reports, persuasive discourse, and personal narrative.

By the time Somerville students have gone through the middle school, they will have participated in the reading of several full length books, among them The Cay (Taylor, 1969), Where the Red Fern Grows (Rawls, 1961), Sounder (Armstrong, 1969), Treasure Island (Stevenson, 1980), Animal Farm (Orwell, 1946), My Side of the Mountain (George, 1959), The Light in the Forest (Richter, 1953), Door in the Wall (DeAngeli, 1949), Wrinkle in Time (L'Engle,

1962), and Island of the Blue Dolphins (O'Dell, 1960). Besides trade books and a grammar text, middle school students also use a Scott, Foresman literature anthology of classic and contemporary selections. Pieces from the anthology are often used as models for student writing. For example, after reading Poe's Telltale Heart, they tried their hand at writing suspense stories. After reading a play, some students wrote their own script and produced a radio play, seeking help from the music teacher and the custodians for props and background music. Full length books comprise literature units that take about two months from start to finish. Even when students demonstrate adequate reading ability for a given text, as measured by standardized tests or oral reading, some conventions of literary language, some aspects of standard formal English usage, and some concepts are foreign to many students, and these have to be made explicit. Despite the extensive use of a literature curriculum, instruction and assessment still focus on explicit literal content. Indeed, at every grade level, a majority of time is still spent on literal comprehension, checking that kids know what's going on in the story. In fact, the most common question asked by teachers during reading is "What does that mean?" As one teacher put it regarding fantasy texts:

> You have to go real slow at first, to make sure nobody gets lost in the beginning where (the book) is being set up--characters, setting. . . . It's tough with these fantasy books, because all the names are so strange and the language is kind of medieval.

Plans for the eighth grade English literature texts consist of discussion notes and quizzes at 1, 2, or 3 chapter intervals ("to make sure they read it"). There are study guide questions for each chapter and the students are supposed to read on their own and come to class prepared to discuss the questions. At the end of the book, there is a big exam with lots of detailed short answer questions (multiple choice or fill-in) and essay questions dealing with theme, setting, character development, etc. The regular eight-grade teacher described the process of reading and discussing in this way:

> We discuss extensively, so they could actually get it without really reading it. We also do projects in groups where the better readers can help the poor readers along.
>
> (In a separate interview): I've spent a lot of time and worked very hard to [have books] with problems they can relate to, like doing poorly in school, problems at home, feelings of teenagers, etc. They have to experience reading a whole book and knowing what it says before they can go on to deal with analysis. Just learning to respond to literature on a simple level is the best preparation we can give them.

A good deal of effort is invested in keeping students engaged rather than just "giving them exposure." It is generally felt that simply providing the opportunity for them to interact with text isn't enough. Group activities and discussions, writing with the word processor, making up poetry as a response to dramatic photos, and letter writing are some of the ways in which students are coaxed into involvement. One reason that such coaxing is necessary is that the school's literature curriculum differs from what we might call the "discursive culture" of home and community.

Two eighth grade girls stated that the reason for their dislike of Animal Farm was that it wasn't realistic. Despite lengthy classroom discussion of characterization and other literary features of the book, the students' ultimate criticism was that the book really made no sense because "pigs can't talk." They expressed a preference for murder mysteries, because they arouse curiosity and because they "could really happen." (One said "We aren't used to pigs talking in books." Like most American, they *were* used to the plausibility of murder and violence and its representation in various media.) Though many students reject book reading as an activity, the few avid readers prefer books they find outside of school.

T.O.: (Discussing Silence of the Lambs [Harris, 1989]) Thick mysteries. My mom brings them home from work. I love them.

For those who read books, the importance of believability is echoed by an adult reader in the community, who said she liked suspense and a realistic plot, as in Stephen King's Misery:

N.I.: There's no reason in the world why, in real life, that wouldn't happen. I mean, I don't like the far-fetched. . . . I mean any crazy woman could hold a man captive and expect him to, you know, adhere to her every wish or whatever and just be mentally crazy.

For this reader, what makes a book worthwhile is the thrill of suspense, and the fact that the action falls within parameters which are easy for her to imagine.

Both in and out of school, there is frequent reference to the preferablility of other media over books. A group of sixth graders thought one might want to read a book in the hospital until one boy suddenly remembered, "Hey, no! They got TV in the hospital." Several women in the local beauty shop were interviewed regarding their reading practices, and one said, "When you finish your book, put it on videotape. I wouldn't want to read it, but I'd like to watch it." Both students and adults expressed the view that, when it came to full-length works, it was best to see the movie, primarily because it would take less time.

There are various other ways in which community life goes against school-based assumptions about education and literature, sustaining a real skepticism about schooling. Community members report a variety of self-perceived successes and shortcomings with regard to both schooling and work. There is a widespread sense of ambivalence about the value of work and school. People want their children to get a good education, so they can get a good job, "One where you work with your brain, not your back." And yet the activities they value and which are central to family togetherness and bonding, particularly for males, are strongly tied to physical activity, often outdoors, and often involving mechanical pursuits.

This out-of-doors, practical orientation is reflected in local cultural views of kinds of reading. "Book reading" (i.e. novel reading) is normaly done during inactive phases of life: by men when they have retired; by women when they are "stuck at home with the kids"; and by all people during convalescence or when the weather is too bad for outdoor activity. One adult reader reported being chided often by her parents "It's a beautiful day, get your nose out of that book!"

A majority of reading materials of choice in the community have the express purpose of supporting things that people do, both vocationally and recreationally, for example, magazines about hunting, trucking, sports, cooking, and crafts. The reading of magazines cuts across age and gender groups, and it would be wrong to view such reading as purely functional or information-seeking. They are consulted for information, to be sure, but they are also texts that enable an imaginative consideration of wider possibilities, within existing categories of "practical life": hunting, trucking, crafts, and so forth. This might be construed as imaginative, or pleasure reading in the guise of practical utility.

In short, the kinds of texts and what is important about them are widely disparate in schooled and nonschooled settings. School implements a literature curriculum, one adapted to its rural circumstances by inclusion of hunting and other outdoors short stories and excerpts, but achieving a bottom-line factual grasp remains the first instructional step toward a fuller textual discussion. Home life proposes a different carving up of "reading": book-reading is for the inactive, whether by circumstances of age, gender, health, or weather; books may circulate avidly among such readers, as may talk about the stories and their realism, but quizzes are never held; and magazines combine practical endeavor with imaginative seeking.

Conclusion

The preceding research argument has been critical in spirit and ethnographic in orientation. Let us conclude by addressing a question often put to education research: "What are the implications of your findings for policy and practice?" We have two provisional answers, which suggest what to think about if not what to do. First, stop assuming that schooling leads to adult work and examine the actual connections between schooling and work. Second, recognize and cultivate the desire for self-direction (even when it does not seem to lead to high incomes or educational excellence as currently defined).

Stop Assuming that Schooling Leads to Adult Work

The disparity between the expectations and demands of schooling and the beliefs and practices of lower-class families and communities is not simply a "gap" to be closed through school reform. It is, rather, the breach wherein a whole new set of relations must be considered. The relationships between family, community, work, and schooling are complex and are based on values and assumptions which, in some places, are vastly different from the widely accepted mainstream views. Policies and programs aimed at lifting poor people out of poverty through education and at improving the quality of our nation's workforce by raising academic skill levels have not been very successful. They are often based on widely held assumptions which do not appear to hold true in the communities where they are applied.

In poor communities, competition and achievement do not play the same role that they do in middle class communities, so achievement cannot simply be assumed to be a high priority in school, except, of course, in the view of the teachers. Most Somerville families seem to view

school as a community gathering place, a place for important ceremonies and social events, but not as a place to strive for economic security or social mobility through academic achievement.

We have argued that the usual perception of the relationship between work and schooling is inadequate. In poor communities, school learning is less important in terms of job preparation than conventional wisdom would indicate, while the realities of the local job market play a very important and under-recognized role in preparing families and students for schooling. The whole notion of education leading to better jobs rests on a middle class assumption of what "better" jobs might be. This assumption is not always shared by poor, rural, working-class people who know that mainstream, professional jobs require moving away, often to a metropolitan area. Given their valuing and experience of physical, outdoor work, there is an ambivalence toward intellectual or office work, which is often seen as less than respectable, and which typically entails social and geographic uprooting.

We thus have initial ethnographic evidence of a class-based skepticism, rooted in local realities, about the schooling-jobs relation. We should at least respect that skepticism. If we stop assuming that schools lead to adult work and want to examine the actual connections, then we must examine materials suggesting the real direction of the economy. As argued earlier, based on reports of job-creation trends, the American economy is not simply heading for some high tech future. Rather, our society faces a more complicated and potentially grim future of many low-wage jobs and a shrinking number of high-tech, high-wage possibilities. Many Somerville families seem to have figured this out, or experienced it, already. The trend toward a two-tier economy means that we must think about the nature of the equality of opportunity we envision schools providing. Do we see schools serving a society in which everyone competes for a small number of highly-placed occupations, featuring advanced degrees and expensive lifestyles? Or do we see schools serving a society in which a broad majority has a chance to carve out a decent life based on high employment with most wages above the poverty level?

Recognize and Cultivate Self-Direction

In this latter vision, success might not depend as much on educational accumulation as educational quality, not as much on "leading the pack" as on finding self-direction. Again we take our cue from Somerville.

A community which doesn't fit the usual dichotomy of white, blue collar gives us an elaborated view of people's orientation to authority and production. With respect to autonomy and flexible scheduling, the Somerville community demonstrates a third style of piecing together a living which actually affords one a good deal of self-directed behavior, although it looks different from the self-direction typically associated with middle-class life and work. In a community where people combine different ways of making a living including part-time and seasonal work, transfer payments, and wide participation in the informal economic sector, there is often an unwillingness to give up the autonomy enjoyed in the status quo. There is a practical logic in rejecting a move "up" to regular jobs which are seen to take away one's control over one's time without providing a real increase in economic status. This logic emphasizes control of one's

work, outdoor life, and connection to place.

This practical logic about work is antecedent to children's encounter with school, and it appears in their skepticism about many school tasks, including those associated with literacy and literature. Somerville children do not come to school without prior experiences of literature and reading, but their experiences and the lessons they draw from them are part of an ethos of vigorous "outdoor" living. The books typically read by adults--romances and westerns--are not those assigned by the literature-based curriculum, and the reading of books is a gender-associated and age-associated activity. It is something done by women at home with the children, by retired men, and by anyone during inclement weather and convalescence. The reading of magazines, another genre typically different from the texts of school, is an activity that is part of a search for ideas as well as for information. Such reading, however, is part of other practical activities (home and vehicle repairs, crafts, hobby collecting), and it is content, not form that matters. Given this background, the chance to occupy "the author's chair" in school may be diverting and enjoyable, but it is not connected to nonschooled experiences with literature. While adult readers may be concerned with whether a novel is realistic, they are not concerned with literary-critical notions such as character development.

Many Somerville adults define success in nonmainstream ways--the ability to provide a living for self and family through part-time work, seasonal work, transfer payments, and participation in the informal economy. The emphasis is on preserving autonomy and controlling one's own time and one's ability to be out and about. In short, the nature of work, or the kind of self-direction achieved through combinations of work is more important than a particular place in the credentials and occupation hierarchy. Similarly, many Somerville students "work the system." They read the texts they (and their families) enjoy--realistic romances, westerns, and action-adventures, various magazines relevant to home and community life--and they negotiate a curriculum in school settings, reading "enough to get by" of the medieval fantasy or contemporary allegory (such as Animal Farm) prized by school literature programs.

We have some idea of what adult self-direction in work arrangements looks like, but we don't really know much about self-direction in schooled experiences with literature. We do know that it will probably be local and therefore diverse. It will require entertaining some new literature possibilities and some new questions about literature, and it will require some new ideas about pedagogy and some new approaches to assessment.

In order to cultivate student self-direction, teachers must have greater autonomy in fashioning curriculum and assessment. They must have the flexibility to respond to local experiences and inclinations. In places such as Somerville, it may be that schooling will have to be less schoolish. In Somerville, texts and social relations through texts suggest a world in which the "practical" is antecedent to, and perhaps, antagonistic to the "scholastic" or the "aesthetic," as these are usually understood. Any effort to revamp literature curriculum and teaching, or school activities more broadly, must take that practical logic seriously.

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